

Migration from Post-War Southern Syria: Drivers, Routes, and Destinations

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Migration from Post-War Southern Syria: Drivers, Routes, and Destinations

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Executive Summary

In the second half of 2021, Daraa governorate witnessed a wave of migration and an estimated 8,000-10,000 individuals, mostly young adults, left Syria entirely. Often security concerns and economic deterioration are intertwined push factors for migration from this peripheral region. However, a lack of funds to cover the cost of migration, high risk of arrest or death *en route* to a destination country, and other socio-cultural factors also affect the likelihood of migration.

Whether legal, illegal, or semi-legal, the outmigration process is based on personal circumstances, calculations related to costs and risks, and destination. A person who is not wanted by the Syrian military or security forces is most likely to leave the country legally through a government-controlled port of exit, such as land border checkpoints or airports. By contrast, security concerns, distrust, and the lack of, or the inability to obtain, the necessary documents needed for legal migration make it more likely that the migrant will cross the Syrian borders illegally. Under these circumstances, prospective migrants use the services of smugglers who benefit from local and regional connections to transport people from Daraa to three main destinations: Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Prospective migrants also combine both legal and illegal migration in a variety of ways by leaving Syria legally through a transit country – such as Sudan, Libya, or Belarus – after which they get themselves smuggled into their final destination.

Government migration policies in potential destination countries and the presence and access to migrant networks are two factors that influence the selection of the destination. In 2021, Lebanon and Jordan have become far less attractive destinations for large segments of prospective migrants in Daraa. Turkey, on the other hand, has become, for the most part, a mere stepping-stone to Europe rather than as an end destination. By contrast, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iraqi Kurdistan were available destinations and have attracted, to varying extents, Daraawi migrants. Germany, followed by the Netherlands, were the most sought after European destinations for Daraawi migrants in 2021.

Introduction

Since its beginnings in 2011, the Syrian conflict induced large-scale internal and external migration. Violence, the destruction of property, and a lack of safety saw thousands of non-combatants flee their homes, searching out security and economic opportunities in different countries.¹ After years of fighting, the war is finally winding down. With some 250,000 Syrians having returned home in the past few years,² be it willingly or after host governments resorted to coercive tactics such as detentions, deportations, and evictions,³ questions on the return of Syrians have become more pressing. Many humanitarians, scholars, and politicians have shifted their focus to the politics of return. While ongoing debates often revolve around the territorial gains made by the Syrian military, the macro and micro dynamics that stimulate out-migration from various parts of the country have been largely overlooked. This is especially the case in areas where a fully-fledged war turned into a low-intensity conflict.

Although the insurgency in the Daraa governorate was quelled in July 2018, volatile post-war conditions continued to push many locals to flee abroad. The 2021 Daraa al-Balad crisis and the subsequent proliferation of altered 'reconciliation' deals allowed the Syrian military and security forces to expand their presence across the south.⁴ Simultaneously, Daraa witnessed a new migration wave. The population of this southern governorate stood at one million in early 2021,⁵ and some 8,000-10,000 people, most young adults, fled Syria between June and December 2021.⁶ What pushed people to migrate from southern Syria? What were the routes open to them? How did prospective migrants choose their destination?

Driven by these queries, this research paper moves away from state-centric, orthodox perspectives. It adopts, instead, a more bottom-up approach to understand migration from post-war southern Syria in the period between June and December 2021. While no universally accepted definition for 'migrants' exists,⁷ this paper uses a broader definition. We include individuals who left their country of origin and entered the territory of another country irrespective of their legal status; their length of stay; and whether the movement was forced or voluntary. The accompanying qualitative research draws on a survey of 40 respondents and 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Daraawi migrants, prospective migrants, and individuals who wanted yet were unable to migrate. The interviews were carried out between June and December 2021. Participants were purposefully selected for their knowledge and experience of migration. This study is not intended to produce statistics. But qualitative surveys help to elicit diverse and detailed responses to open-ended questions. They capture opinions, narratives, and experiences within a population. Respondents were asked about: what pushes them to migrate; economic capital; smugglers; and migration destinations. To ensure the safety of interviewees, names, locations, and personal identifying information have been omitted.

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- 1 During a decade of war, 12 million Syrians, half of the country's pre-war population, have been forced to leave their homes. Of that number, around 6.6 million left the country. 5.6 million are hosted by the country's immediate neighbours, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Médecins Sans Frontières, "A Decade of War in Syria: 10 Years of Increasing Humanitarian Needs," 3 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3oFrldu>; UNHCR, "Syria Emergency," 15 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3xc8vfe>
 - 2 UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions," 31 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3rVEZLx>
 - 3 Amnesty International, "Turkey: Illegal Mass Returns of Syrian Refugees Expose Fatal Flaws in EU-Turkey Deal," 1 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3dIDg3X>; Norwegian Refugee Council, "Dangerous Ground Syria's Refugees Face an Uncertain Future," 5 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/33lgBJ2>; Human Rights Watch, "Jordan: Syrian Refugees Being Summarily Deported," 2 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/3rW43lp>
 - 4 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria," Policy Brief, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, October 2021), <https://bit.ly/3BX1SzH>
 - 5 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," *Humanitarian Programme Cycle*, March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3p11mNI>
 - 6 A series of interviews with local activists, travel agents, and passports brokers (June - December 2021).
 - 7 International Organization for Migration, *Glossary on Migration*, (Geneva: IOM, 2019), <https://bit.ly/30iRcOT>

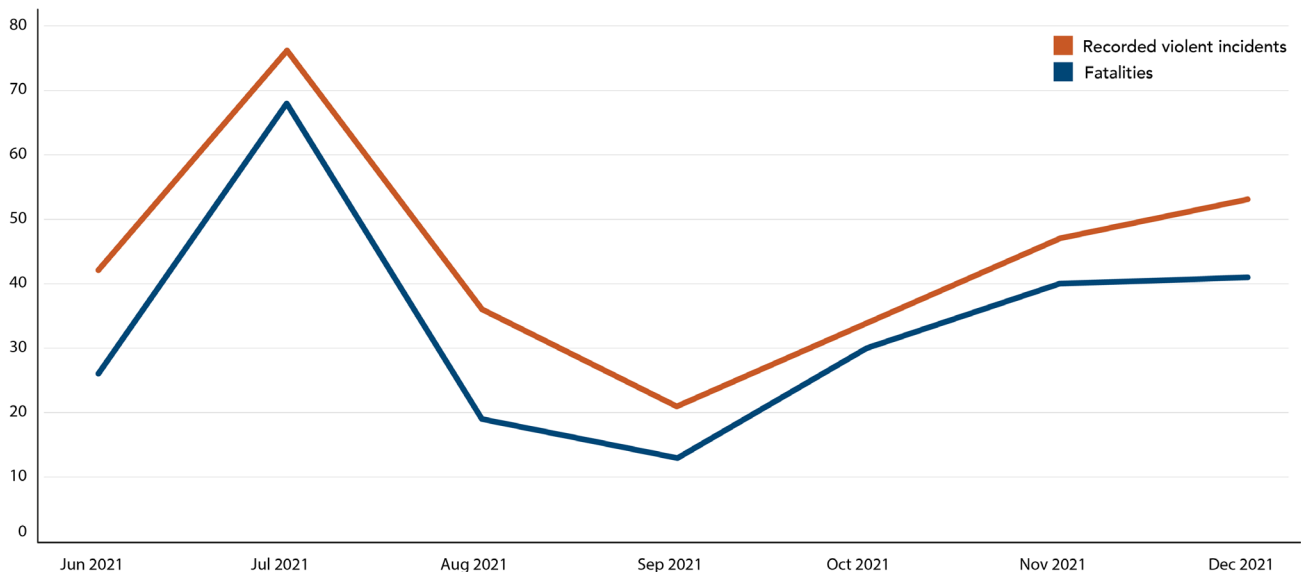
1. Root Causes of Migration from Daraa

During the war, large-scale violence, destruction, suffering, and uncertainty spurred migration from Daraa governorate. Although the Syrian military, backed by Russia, managed to recapture the governorate in July 2018, post-war conditions continued to favour outmigration, especially among young adults. Migration push factors from Daraa can be disaggregated into general and personal security concerns and deteriorating economic conditions.

1.1. General and Personal Security Concerns

Even after the end of fighting in 2018 Daraa has remained disorderly. An abundance of light firearms, the presence of unreconciled former rebels, and limitations imposed on the deployment of the military and security regime forces in parts of the south have fuelled episodes of violence. Murders, assassinations, and kidnapping have become a part of daily life.⁸ In 2021, the Daraa al-Balad crisis and subsequent renewed 'reconciliation deals' changed the predominant order in southern Syria. Nevertheless, the surrender of large quantities of arms, 'settling the status' of 14,000 wanted individuals, and expanding military and security control did not bring about a secure environment. The number of violent incidents significantly declined in September 2021. But Daraa saw an uptick in violent incidents and fatalities in the months that followed (Figure 1).⁹

Figure 1. Violent incidents and fatalities in Daraa (June – December 2021)



Source: the author

The already fragile security climate was aggravated by a surge in interpersonal crimes. Theft, homicide, robbery, mugging, and profit kidnapping (especially of children) have seemingly become widespread practices. According to official sources, Daraa has registered more Syrian homicide victims than any other governorate in 2021, with 115 out of 414 victims nationally.¹⁰ Illicit activities and the proliferation

8 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria", Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, April 2020), <https://bit.ly/34nt2jL>

9 Data collected and verified by the author. Violent incidents include assassinations, kidnappings, and IED attacks.

10 Mohammed Manar Hamejo, "414 Homicide Victims, 50 Percent Detected within 48 Hours and 95 Percent Within Two Weeks," (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 14 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/33rGDu1>

of drugs made the security situation still worse. Families have particularly become concerned that their children will (or are already) using and selling narcotics. “We thought that the surrender of weapons would improve the security situation, but to no avail. No one knows who kills who, and for what reasons mutilated corpses and amputated limbs are being found here and there. What makes me most frightened for the future of my children is the unprecedented spread of pills [Captagon]. I decided to leave the country in search of safety for myself and my family,” (Interview, November 2021).

Besides general security concerns, a fear of impending arrest or assassination is expressed by: (1) former civilian opposition figures; (2) ‘reconciliation’ rejectionists; (3) draft evaders, military deserters, and defectors; and (4) individuals who embarked on a ‘reconciliation’ process yet still fear punishment. Despite the release of detainees in Daraa, especially recently,¹¹ the fear of arrest by the military and security forces has remained high. This sense of menace created restrictions on free movement and work, causing poverty and uncertainty. Daraawis with personal security concerns were more likely to flee whenever they can, to wherever they can. “Many people who were assassinated or arrested had settled their status. That makes me think that my name is maybe on someone’s assassination list. I try to stay at home all the time. That’s why I can’t work and make a living. I must leave whenever I can because I can’t live in fear and poverty for ever,” (Interview, December 2021).

1.2. Economic Factors

Migration from southern Syria should also be understood in economic and day-to-day terms. Infrastructure damage and reduced operability, a sharp decline in workforce numbers, and the inability of state institutions to provide effective service provision have all contributed to worsening living standards in Daraa.¹² Moreover, reduced employment opportunities and income have augmented poverty and have led to an increase in the number of people struggling to meet basic needs. In March 2021, the population of Daraa had the highest income deficit in Syria (only 53% of expenses covered by income). Debt payment had doubled three times since 2019 (11%). Over 60% of the population were food insecure. Nearly 70% of the population were in need, and 20% in acute need of humanitarian assistance with a 6% increase in 2021 compared to 2020.¹³ People are worried about daily survival and many have sold household assets, goods, and livestock to cope. In addition, a sharp decline in agriculture has increased the likelihood of migration from a region where cultivation is a primary activity for a large segment of the population. Deteriorating security conditions and the presence of explosives have prevented access to the fields. The government’s elimination of fertilizer subsidies, rising seed, pesticide and fuel prices,¹⁴ the drought, and illegal well drilling have all made it difficult to make money in agriculture.¹⁵

In contrast to this, higher wages, and better working conditions in other countries make for strong pull factors. It should be remembered here that remittances have become an important source of income for Syrian households. In some instances, contractual arrangements stipulate that the family provides funds for one (or more) of its members to migrate from Daraa on the condition that they will contribute to the household income by sending regular remittances once they start working. The importance of remittances in the family economy should not be underestimated. At the time of writing, the minimum wage of a state employee was SYP 72,000 (USD 28.8), while the average living cost for a family of

11 Between 7 November and 13 December 2021, 101 detainees were released in five successive batches; note that only six out of 15 detainees in the first batch hailed from Daraa.

12 Al-Jabassini, “Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria.”

13 OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic.”

14 Joseph Daher, “Cuts to Oil Derivative Subsidies: Consequences for Syria,” Policy Brief, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, War-time and Post-Conflict in Syria, October 2021), <https://bit.ly/3oWxvGe>

15 A series of interviews with agricultural engineers (June – November 2021).

five in Daraa was estimated at between SYP 650,000 and 850,000 (USD 260-340).¹⁶ “Agriculture has become an extremely unprofitable sector. My dad agreed to sell our land to pay for the entire trip on the condition that I wire monthly remittances to him when I arrive in Europe and start working. If I send him USD 150 per month, then I am basically sending him more than five times his monthly salary,” (Interview, November 2021).

Despite the widespread desire to migrate, several factors affect the likelihood of migration from Daraa. First, a lack of funds to cover the cost of migration. Prospective migrants have, when they have the resources, often been obliged to dip into their savings, sold land, an apartment, furniture, a vehicle, or livestock. Some also appeal to cross-border networks and the wider diaspora, mainly in the Gulf Kingdoms, for funds to migrate. Others who can't afford to migrate are forced to stay home. Second, several interviewees decided to stay in Daraa because of the high risk of arrest or death *en route* to new life in a destination country. Finally, socio-cultural factors also hinder the decision to migrate. This is particularly true for closely-knit families and in households where some members are highly dependent on others. “I thought about migration to escape my military service, which begins next year. But I did not want to leave my widowed mother alone. This is not our culture and people will shame me. Besides, we do not have any savings or relatives abroad to financially support us to travel together. I decided to stay hoping that the security and economic situation will improve, I am not an exception; many of my friends couldn't migrate for similar reasons,” (Interview, July 2021).

2. Determinants and Routes of Legal and Illegal Migration

The decision to migrate entails many questions about how to leave the country of origin and how to enter the country of destination. There are three main types of outmigration from Syria: legal, illegal, and an ‘in-between’ semi-legal category.¹⁷ Legal migration “occurs through recognized, authorized channels.” By contrast, illegal migration is “a movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries.”¹⁸ A semi-legal migrant either leaves the country of origin legally and enters the country of transit and/or destination illegally, or *vice versa*.¹⁹ A migrant's choice here depends on personal circumstances, a cost-benefit analysis, and ultimate destination.

2.1. Legal Migration

In principle, prospective migrants have a strong preference for crossing the Syrian borders legally in the prospect of return. A person who is not on the Syrian regime's wanted list is likely to leave the country legally through a government-controlled border checkpoint or an airport. The possession of a valid passport is a pre-requisite and the standard process costs SYP 12,170 (USD 4,86).²⁰ However, due to high demand during the second half of 2021, there were waits of up to five months, according to several people who went through the process in Daraa. To expedite the process, some Daraawis sought help from brokers, which in some cases cost SYP 1.5-2 million (USD 600-800).²¹

16 A series of interviews with Daraawis residing in western, eastern, and central Daraa. This paper uses, note, the official exchange rate of 1 USD for 2,500 SYP. On 15 December 2021, salaries were increased 30% by presidential decree. SANA, “President al-Assad Issues a Decree to Increase Salaries and Wages for Civil and Military Workers by 30 Percent,” (in Arabic), 15 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/3FhBjaZ>

17 For the purpose of this research paper, legality concerns the *departure* and *entry* and not the *stay*.

18 International Organization for Migration, *Glossary on Migration*, 54,81.

19 This paper deals with migration patterns in which migrants have left Syria and have entered transit country legally before they entered the final country of destination illegally.

20 Ministry of Interior, “Immigration and Passport Transactions,” (in Arabic), undated, <https://bit.ly/3o7tPkH>

21 In November 2021, the Ministry of Interior issued a decision by which the Immigration and Passports Directorates expedites passport delivery on the same day of the application for SYP 100,000 (USD 40). SANA, “The Ministry of Interior: Immediate Passport Service for 100,000 SYP,” (in Arabic), 24 November 2021, <https://bit.ly/3xLBkRu>

In addition to a valid passport, males aged between 17 and 42 are required to present a travel permit, issued either by the General Recruitment Directorate (GRD) or by its regional recruitment centres, to leave the country legally.²² In 2021, Daraawi males aged from 17 to 42 benefited from exclusive administrative orders issued by the GRD. This facilitated passport and travel permit applications. In April, the GRD first issued a decision which granted evaders from compulsory and reservist military services a one-year deferment.²³ It then, in June, instructed recruitment centres to grant travel permits to males in possession of a one-year deferral for military service.²⁴ Perhaps the choice to give young adults an opportunity to migrate was a tactic to let latent manpower go and bring the region under firmer security grip. Perhaps it was an attempt to win ‘hearts and minds’ by easing security measures. In any case, the two decisions allowed hundreds of young adult males to leave Syria legally during the second half of 2021.

2.2. Illegal Migration

Security concerns and the lack, or the inability to obtain, the necessary documents make it more likely that individuals will cross the Syrian borders illegally. This is particularly true of those wanted by the Syrian regime - civilian opposition members and local activists; former rebels; military draft evaders, deserters, and defectors - who have chosen not to ‘settle’ their status, or who have embarked on a ‘reconciliation’ process yet fear reprisals from the military and security forces. In fact, reports of arrests of ‘reconciled’ individuals near government premises while applying for passports have made many others reluctant to exit Syria legally.²⁵ In these cases, prospective migrants resort to smugglers. In Daraa, smuggling is a deep-rooted practice that goes back to the pre-war era.²⁶ Local smuggling networks expanded during the conflict and then remained active in the unstable post-war era. Smuggling in Daraa is performed by complex, non-hierarchical, and loosely connected networks, most of whom are based outside of the region and who rely on local facilitators. Smuggling services from Daraa are available to three main destinations. Each has its own fees and risks.

One destination is Jordan. In 2021, the demand was reportedly low. The cost ranged from USD 3,500 to 5,000 per person. Here, smuggling networks have been more invested in drug trafficking than transporting people. Nevertheless, local sources recounted instances in which drug smugglers offered migrants discounts and free journeys if they transport narcotics into Jordan. On many occasions, this kind of smuggling has cost migrants their life. “I know migrants who agreed to carry drugs with them in order to cross the borders, but they were shot by Jordanian border guards. They thought they were drug smugglers,” (Interview, November 2021).

The second smuggling route is to Lebanon which costs from USD 100 to 600 for those wanting to go. However, migrants are not immune to being shook down *en route*. In many reported cases, migrants paid more (USD 100-300) when a smuggler explicitly or implicitly demanded extra payment for various reasons: e.g., lack of gas money, to take a longer and safer route, a bribe payment. “The smuggler went to smoke a cigarette with some unknown individuals on the road. It was dark. I do not know if they were soldiers or just bandits. The smuggler came by and told me: ‘The people I know are not here. These are new ones. They need money to let us pass or they said that they will come to arrest you. So, I paid an extra USD 200,” (Interview, July 2021).

22 This requires a deposit of SYP 50,000 (USD 20) at one of the branches of the Real Estate Bank of Syria. People exempted from military service such as people with physical or mental disabilities and others who paid the exemption fees do not need a travel permit. Syrian Ministry of Defence, “Travel Permission,” (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3Eep8ea>

23 Daraa 24, “Postponing Military Service in Daraa for One Year”, (in Arabic), 6 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3xUmtEt>

24 The author obtained a copy of the decision issued on 17 June 2021. This administrative order rescinds a preceding one issued on 23 May, which ordered the refusal of approvals for travel permits.

25 According to an interviewee from Daraa city, three ‘reconciled’ former rebels seeking to get a passport were arrested by security forces near the Immigration and Passport Directorate in early November 2021.

26 Several interviews with locals residing in border hamlets in Daraa (June-December 2021).

A third route is from Daraa to Turkey, via areas controlled by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in northern Syria. This route is particularly used by migrants whose choice of destination is either Turkey or a European country. The migrant leaves Daraa for SNA-held areas and pays anything from USD 1,000 to 2,000. The route passes through regime-held areas, which means a high risk of death or arrest from the regime's forces. In one occurrence in August 2020, 50 migrants from Daraa crossed a minefield on their way to northern Syria: seven died and others were seriously injured and captured by the military. Arrival in SNA-held areas does not necessarily mean that there is no longer danger. In many cases, migrants were arrested on suspicion of regime infiltration. Migrants sometimes ended up in prison and were interrogated there for a variety of known and unknown reasons.²⁷ Typically, leaders of SNA constituent groups seek help, in these circumstances, from Daraawis who reside in northern Syria, many of whom were displaced from Daraa to northern Syria in July and August 2018,²⁸ to vet and to vouch for the migrants release.²⁹ In SNA-held areas, a prospective migrant uses the services of a smuggler to cross the Turkish border. According to several sources, smuggling networks on the northern borders of Syria is a murky business, involving figures from the SNA. Depending on safety, point of entry, length of route (e.g., jumping over the wall, using tunnels), the cost ranges from USD 600 to 3,000.

2.3. Semi-Legal Migration

Prospective migrants can combine both legal and illegal migration in a variety of ways. In practice, migrants can leave Syria legally for a transit country, after which they are smuggled to their final destination.³⁰ The most important transit countries have been Sudan, Libya, and Belarus. A few Daraawis left legally for Sudan and hired smugglers upon their arrival to enter Egypt illegally. This was especially true of families who sought to apply to UNHCR in Egypt and to benefit from resettlement programs to countries like the US, Canada, and Australia.

Another route was to leave Syria legally for Libya and then to be smuggled to Europe by sea. This route peaked in the summer of 2021 for a cost which, due to high demand, exceeded USD 3,500. This sum covered a Libyan security approval permit issued by the Libyan Military Investment Authority, a plane ticket, and journeys down smuggling networks from Benghazi to the shores of Tripoli, then to Europe across the Mediterranean.³¹ Many Daraawis made this trip between May and mid-June 2021. However, the Libyan coastguards have become more active in intercepting migrants. Incidents of detention, torture, death, and the blackmail of migrants have become widespread.³² The result is that many prospective migrants are now disinclined to go to Europe via Libya.

Finally, migrants had a temporary window for migration to Minsk, Belarus via Damascus airport. From there they could enter Europe illegally. The process of obtaining a Belarus visa in Damascus was managed by travel agents and brokers and in some cases cost as much as USD 6,000. However, amid a flow of migrants on the Belarusian-Polish border, the Belarus Embassy in Damascus suspended visa applications in November 2021. Instances of Syrian migrants being deported began shortly after.³³

27 According to local sources, a former rebel leader, Yasar al-Miqdad, was captured in Jarablus in northern Aleppo in November 2021. Turkish intelligence was allegedly involved in his interrogation, and al-Miqdad is still in prison at the time of writing. (Interview, December 2021).

28 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations," Working Paper, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, January 2019), <https://bit.ly/2Vj5okC>

29 A series of interviews with migrants who passed through SNA-held areas (June- December 2021).

30 Migrants can also leave Syria illegally then travel to a destination country by legal means (e.g., via Lebanon).

31 Daraa 24, "'Libya' is One of the Stations of The Difficult Migration Journey, So What Compels the Youth of Hawran to Go through It Despite the Difficulties?" (in Arabic), 3 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/3e2dsQw>

32 Alaraby, "Tragic Conditions for Syrians Detained in Libya," (in Arabic), 9 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3q2PZ79>

33 Athar Press, "The Belarusian Embassy in Damascus has Stopped Granting 'Visa'," (in Arabic), 17 November 2021, <https://bit.ly/3oB7eNx>; Al-Alam, "The First Plane to Deport Syrians from Belarus to Damascus Airport Takes off," (in Arabic) 8 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/3oZTEDv>

3. Identifying Destination Preferences

When an individual is no longer prepared to live in his or her home country, then they must choose a destination. Two crucial interrelated factors influence the selection of a destination. The first are the migration policies devised by the governments of destination countries. The second is access to networks of migrants defined as “sets of interpersonal ties that link migrants, former migrants, and non migrants in origin and destination through the bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin.”³⁴ Migrant networks compose important sources for information about: the migration policies of governments; the cost of (il)legal migration; available routes; potential risks; asylum practices; contact information for potential smugglers; as well as the advantages and disadvantages to be expected in the country of destination. Closely knit social networks are also an important source for social and material support that mitigate social, economic, and emotional costs and that mitigate marginality by helping integration in the country of destination. From an economic perspective, such networks help to provide support for day-to-day subsistence, food sharing, the search for accommodation and employment, thus substantially reducing costs.³⁵ This section analyses the destination preferences of migration to Jordan, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, and the EU.

3.1. Jordan and Lebanon

When the Syrian conflict erupted in 2011, Lebanon and Jordan were the preferred migration destinations for Daraawis. A pre-war history of circular labour migration, shared language, a similar culture and religion, geographical proximity, relatively low travel costs, and cross-border clan ties all proved strong pull factors. Pre-existing social networks (based on blood and home-town ties) helped migrants to settle. The networks offered shelter, resources, help finding a job, and, most importantly, integration into the Daraawi diaspora. “Lebanon is where I have old friends and I frequently travelled for work during the 1990s. And northern Jordan is where I have close relatives and family. When the war started, no one in Daraa really looked beyond Jordan and Lebanon for a haven. My contacts in both countries generously offered to provide shelter and to help me to find work. For that reason, making the decision to leave Daraa was not difficult at all,” (Interview, June 2021).

While the open border policy had initially demonstrated a commitment to providing Syrians with a haven, a spike in Syrian refugees,³⁶ and increasing security concerns pushed the Lebanese and Jordanian authorities to adopt more restrictive policies. In 2013, Jordan began to close border crossings,³⁷ and in late 2014, Lebanon introduced firmer regulations to limit the entry of Syrians. Both governments have gradually hardened restrictions on Syrians entering the country and their access to employment and health care, albeit in varying degrees.³⁸ With the exception of cases in which a few rebel leaders close to Amman were able to mediate legal entry for non-combatants, based on blood-ties and kinship,

34 Douglas S. Massey, “Economic Development and International Migration in Comparative Perspective,” *Population and Development Review* 14, no. 3 (1988): 396.

35 Banerjee, “Social Networks in the Migration Process”; Ivan Light, Parminder Bhachu, and Stavros Karageorgis, “Migration Networks and Immigrant Entrepreneurship,” in *Immigration and Entrepreneurship* (Routledge, 1993).

36 In late 2014, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon surpassed 1.1 million, which amounted to around 25% of Lebanon’s population, and in Jordan there were 618,615 Syrian refugees, which amounted to 9.8% of the population. Amnesty International, “Facts & Figures: Syria Refugee Crisis & International Resettlement,” 5 December 2014, <https://bit.ly/3xH6d9F>

37 Alexandra Francis, “Jordan’s Refugee Crisis,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 September 2015, <https://bit.ly/3rrXyXm>. Increasing security concerns have pushed Jordan to reduce open border crossings from 45 in 2012 to 5 in 2015, two of which were for non-combatants, and which were, then, completely closed in June 2016. The last border crossing was closed following a suicide attack carried out by the Islamic State against a Jordanian military post in al-Rakban Amman Net, “Hadalat Border Camp ‘Out of Coverage,’” (in Arabic), 3 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3xHzCAt>

38 According to the regulations issued in late 2014, persons applying for, or renewing, residency permits were asked to: pay USD 200; present a valid passport; provide a document signed by a Lebanese sponsor; and to pledge not to work. See: Amnesty International, “Pushed to the Edge: Syrian Refugees Face Increased Restrictions in Lebanon,” 15 June 2015, <https://bit.ly/3Edwlex>.

constraints placed on legal migration have pushed people to resort to smugglers. Smugglers enjoyed connections with leaders of rebel factions, military checkpoints, and other smugglers elsewhere in Syria. “2015 was the year in which Daraa became a hotbed for smugglers. I personally knew many of them. They do not care about politics and who is fighting who, they just care about making money and war is a great environment for their business. They knew everyone on the way that they could take anyone from Daraa to Lebanon or Jordan in no time,” (Interview, September 2021).

However, in 2021, Lebanon and Jordan have become far less attractive destinations for prospective migrants in Daraa. In Lebanon, a deepening financial and economic downturn since 2019 have made Syrians more vulnerable. Owing to inflation and a 404% increase in food prices, in June 2021, 49% of Syrian refugee families were reportedly food insecure and about two-thirds had to limit food portion sizes.³⁹ In Jordan, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for the economy has made Syrians worse off. While 68% of the refugees have endured an income drop since the beginning of the pandemic,⁴⁰ in September 2021, almost 90% of Syrian refugees in Jordan were reportedly food insecure or on the edge of food insecurity.⁴¹ Syrians in both countries have been blamed for the worsening economic situation in their adopted homes. “My contacts told me that life in Lebanon has changed quite a lot for Syrians. I love Lebanon, but I just can’t live in a place where the chances of being harassed and humiliated for escaping the suffering and misery is even one percent,” (Interview, October 2021).

In addition to economic problems, there have been reports of arbitrary detention and of torture,⁴² forced deportations,⁴³ violent attacks against refugees in Lebanon,⁴⁴ and arrests that targeted former rebels and opposition media activists in both Lebanon and Jordan. These have all raised questions about whether the two countries can be considered safe havens.⁴⁵ This is especially so in Jordan where security measures, according to several interviewees, emanate from a shift in political stance and a recent rapprochement made by the Kingdom towards Syria.⁴⁶ “My relatives in Jordan advised me to travel somewhere else. The economy is bad, working opportunities are very hard to find, and the police started arresting Syrians criticizing the regime now. We do not doubt the authenticity and generosity of the Jordanian people, but who would ever think about going to a country where the government is telling people in one way or another ‘do not come’?” (Interview, December 2021).

3.2. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iraqi Kurdistan

In 2021, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iraqi Kurdistan, and Egypt became popular main destinations for legal migrants from Syria. In the UAE, the Daraawi community predates the Syrian conflict by many years. The conditions in the war and the post-war eras have deepened the economic dependency of many Daraawis on their social networks in the UAE. In September 2021, when the UAE reopened and

39 UNHCR, “UN: Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Struggle to Survive Amid Worst Socioeconomic Crisis in Decades,” 29 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/32RZyxY>

40 WFP, “Funding Crunch Forces WFP to Scale Back Food Assistance to Syrian Refugees in Jordan,” 3 June 2021, <https://bit.ly/3EOJBG6>

41 Hanna Davis, “Food Assistance Cut Imminent, WFP Alerts 110,000 Syrian Refugees,” *The Jordan Times*, 15 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3pO9yKl>

42 Amnesty International, “Lebanon: ‘I Wished I Would Die’- Syrian Refugees Arbitrarily Detained on Terrorism-Related Charges and Tortured in Lebanon,” 23 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ESZkDY>

43 Amnesty International, “Lebanon: General Security Must Halt Imminent Deportation of Six Syrians,” 8 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3pMkzmO>

44 Syrian Association for Citizen’s Dignity, “Treatment of Syrian Refugees is Lebanon’s Most Serious Human Rights Failure,” 13 January 2021, <https://bit.ly/3pNpLqk>

45 On two consecutive days in August 2021, five former rebels wanted by the Syrian regime were arrested near the Syrian embassy in Beirut. These were a former rebel leader Tawfiq Faiz al-Hajji, Ibrahim Majid al-Shammari, Mohammed Abdullilah Suleiman al-Wakid, Mohammed Said al-Wakid and Ahmad Ziad al-Eid. Moreover, in November 2021, Jordanian Intelligence services arrested a journalist based in Amman, Ibrahim Awad, confiscated his equipment, and removed him to al-Azraq refugee camp.

46 CNN, “The Fate of Jordan’s Many Refugees”, 25 July 2021, <https://cnn.it/37DgrM9>

halved the fees of visa application for Syrians (USD 150 and 300 for, respectively, one- and three-month[s] tourist permits),⁴⁷ potential migrants tapped into their social networks for information and material support. The main pull factor for migration to the UAE are not only job opportunities (248,999 jobs were created in 2020 when the global economy was shrinking because of COVID-19),⁴⁸ but also social and familial networks, high-levels of security (the world's second safest country in 2021),⁴⁹ and linguistic similarities. According to the surveys and interviews conducted for this study, the UAE is a strong choice of migration destination particularly for Daraawis who have access to a closely knit social network there. "Even if someone has enough money, no one thinks about migrating to the Emirates [UAE] if he does not have well-established close relatives who are willing to support him. If you do not know people who have networks to find you a job immediately after your arrival, it will be almost impossible to find a job yourself and to change your tourist visa to a work permit," (Interview, December 2021).

Egypt has become by far the most popular and desired destination amongst Daraawi migrants. While it had initially adopted an open-door policy, in July 2013, Egypt required Syrians to apply for a visa and security clearance prior to travelling to Egypt.⁵⁰ At that time, such developments did not matter for many Daraawis. However, with restrictions gradually tightening in Jordan and Lebanon, few Daraawis obtained an Egyptian security clearance through brokers and travel agents or were smuggled in via Sudan at a cost of USD 1,500. In some cases, the fee for Egyptian security approval reached USD 3,000 in early 2021. But it sharply declined to USD 400 in mid-2021, encouraging many Daraawis to migrate to Egypt via Damascus airport. With more migrants arriving in Egypt recently, networks have further expanded and have become an important source of information and support for Daraawis at home. The pull factors to migrate to Egypt are abundant: legal migration; shared language, customs and religion; access to basic services and livelihood opportunities; no refugee camps and eligibility for family reunification; and a well-integrated Syrian community that is admired by the host community. There are also relatively affordable living conditions. "I came and stayed with my cousin who told me a lot about the country, work opportunities, and living conditions. I do not regret my decision. Egyptians are kind and hospitable people and I feel comfortable with the fact that we have so much in common. If not Daraa, then Cairo is the place where I want to spend the rest of my life," (Interview, December 2021).

Besides the UAE and Egypt, a few Daraawis have recently considered Iraqi Kurdistan as a migration destination. However, during the last decade, the region has attracted only a handful. In December 2013, they represented 0.1% of a total of 209,406 Syrian refugees,⁵¹ 0.8% of 231,843 in 2014, and below 1% in 2015, 2016, and 2017.⁵² In 2021, a few Daraawis applied for an extendable visa issued by the Ministry of Interior through agents based in Damascus or in Erbil at a cost that ranged from USD 170 to 250. The presence of foreign embassies, UN agencies, INGOs, and many Syrian NGOs have made Erbil, according to interviewees, a suitable migration destination for individuals seeking employment, resettlement in a third country through UNHCR, or family reunification applications submitted by first-degree relative migrants in Europe. There have been more and more Syrian migrants arriving in Iraqi Kurdistan: this can be seen in the increasing number of flights between Damascus and Erbil when borders reopened in October 2020 after a year of closure due to the pandemic.⁵³

47 Eqtsad, "UAE Attracts Syrians by Halving Visa Fees," (in Arabic), 23 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3E8Wcnb>

48 Muzaffar Rizvi, "UAE Created 248,000 Jobs in Pandemic Year: Sheikh Mohammed," *Khaleej Times*, 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3lSUMkp>

49 Marc Gerzoff, "World's Safest Countries 2021," *Global Finance*, 6 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/3GRhveB>

50 UNHCR, "UNHCR Expresses Concern over New Restrictions for Syrian Refugees in Egypt," 12 July 2013, <https://bit.ly/3xVlgLW>

51 UNHCR, "Registration Trends for Syrians," 12 December 2013, <https://bit.ly/2ZVlrvi>

52 UNHCR, "Registration Trends for Syrian Persons of Concern," 15 December 2014, <https://bit.ly/31lu2lf>; UNHCR, "Registration Trends for Syrian Persons of Concern," 15 April 2015, <https://bit.ly/32WiLP7>; UNHCR, "Trends for Syrian Persons of Concern," 15 January 2016, <https://bit.ly/3Dowj2i>; UNHCR, "Registration Trends for Syrian Persons of Concern," 31 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/3Dowj2i>

53 To meet the increasing demand, Cham Wings, a private Syrian airline, increased the number of its flights from two per week to daily ones in October 2020. Dima al-Qaid, "The Syrian expatriate to Erbil... What are the Syrians looking for in this city?" (in Arabic), *Raseef 22*, 24 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3DpxAWS>

The number of Daraawis, though, who filed for visa remained small: the lowest amongst all Syrian governorate applications in 2020 and 2021.⁵⁴ Increasing unemployment and poverty among young adults,⁵⁵ fears of linguistic barriers and insignificant social networks discouraged Daraawis from migrating to Iraqi Kurdistan. “Iraqi Kurdistan is an option. People heard a lot about the advantages of Erbil from many travel agents in Daraa. A few young men have actually gone there for work. But in general, there is no big [Daraawi] community in Iraqi Kurdistan, and because people prefer to invest their money in migrating to a country where they have relatives and acquaintances, they largely refrain from taking the risk,” (Interview, October 2021).

3.3. Turkey and the European Union

Encouraged initially by its open-door policy, many Daraawis migrated to Turkey by legal means during the first years of the Syrian conflict. In spring 2015, however, Ankara closed the remaining two gates on the border with Syria and limited entry to urgent medical cases.⁵⁶ With legal migration constrained, Turkey was soon added to the list of destinations by smugglers in Daraa. Illegal migration to Turkey became widespread after the regime recaptured southern Syria in July 2018. This was especially true for former rebels who sought to escape punishment. Interviewees mentioned a number of pull factors. Here was a country ruled by a party that has a tough stance against the Syrian regime and that supports the political and armed opposition; Turkey has a large community of Syrian migrants; a shared Islamic identity; it offers citizenship possibilities; employment opportunities; access to basic services; and there are UN agencies, aid organisations, and Syrian NGOs.

However, Turkey’s hospitality has worn thin. There have been instances of the deportation of Syrians,⁵⁷ and interest in Turkey as a destination became weaker for many Daraawis from 2019 onwards. Interviewees listed numerous ‘push-away’ factors including: tight restrictions on movement; Syrians being scapegoated for Turkey’s economic woes – including rising unemployment and undercut pay; widespread discrimination and anti-refugee sentiments; hate crimes and violent attacks against individuals and properties; instances of home raids and arrests under AKP rule; and promises made by the main opposition Republican People’s Party’s (CHP) to restore relations with Syria and to send refugees back with their “consent.”⁵⁸ Coupled with delays in processing and approving asylum applications filed in European embassies, many interviewees suggested that Turkey has become a mere stepping-stone for Daraawi migrants heading illegally to Europe.

Certain European countries remain an ideal migration destination. Prospective Daraawi migrants built on the histories and experiences of former migrants and tapped into extensive social networks of relatives, friends, and friends of friends. Interviewees cited various plusses: good security; equal access to basic services; financial support provided by the government of the host country; thriving labour market and employment prospects; effective education systems; and freedom of movement between European countries. “Drowning while being smuggled to Europe is less painful than dying every day at home. At least I will die with satisfaction that I did everything I could trying to secure a better future for my children,” (Interview, October 2021). There are other negatives, of course, besides the dangers of the journey: the cost; the risk of arrest and being obliged to apply for asylum in a country other than the destination choice; cultural differences; lengthy family reunification processes; stricter conditions of eligibility for citizenship; integration – especially amongst older people – as well as growing anti-immigrant sentiments.

54 Interview with a travel agent based in Erbil who processes visa applications for Syrians (December 2021).

55 Dilan Sirwan, “Kurdistan’s Unemployed Youth Blame the Government,” *Rudaw*, 12 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ej1Xo1>

56 Ceylan Yeginsu and Karam Shoumali, “Turkey Moves to Close All Gates at Border with Syria,” 29 March 2015, *New York Times*, <https://nyti.ms/3pKwnVw>

57 Al-Jumhuriya, “Decisions Suffocate Syrians in Turkey,” (in Arabic), 16 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/3rC4LUW>; Amnesty International, “Turkey: Syrians Illegally Deported Into War Ahead of Anticipated ‘Safe Zone,’” 25 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3E9LYTB>

58 Hürriyet Daily News, “CHP Vows to Resolve Syrian Question,” 27 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3y190L2>

Based on access to existing social networks which conveyed hospitable environments and which signalled the readiness for support upon arrival, interviews indicated that the two most sought after European migration destinations for Daraawis are Germany and, in second place, the Netherlands. Social networks have also actively advised prospective migrants to avoid certain European destination countries. For instance, many Daraawis were warned by relatives and friends in Europe against migration to Denmark, given its recent decisions to revoke residence permits and to deport Syrian refugees, on the basis that certain parts of Syria are “safe” now.⁵⁹ “My cousin told me to completely avoid Denmark. Apparently, some politicians in that country have no idea what they are talking about. They think Syria is safe,” (Interview, December 2021).

Conclusion

There is little to suggest that migration from Daraa governorate will halt. Collective and personal security concerns, as well as deteriorating economic conditions will continue to account for legal and illegal migration from southern Syria. While the poorest sections of the population are forced to remain, others are likely to take the decision to migrate from Syria. Top of the list are Daraawis with personal security concerns. The determinants of legal and illegal migration are contingent on individual circumstances. Those who are not wanted by the Syrian military or security institutions are likely to leave the country legally using a valid passport through a government-controlled border checkpoint. In contrast, those who are wanted and others who embarked upon a ‘reconciliation’ process still have a fear of reprisal and are more likely to opt for illegal migration and to use the services of smugglers.

There are two core factors which have a profound impact on the choice of migration destinations for a Daraawi migrant. First, shifts in a state’s migration policies and second, the presence of a migrant network. Our research found that, on these grounds, Lebanon and Jordan have become far less attractive destinations for prospective migrants in Daraa. Turkey, meanwhile, has become a stepping-stone to Europe. By contrast, the UAE, Egypt, and, to a lesser extent, Iraqi Kurdistan have attracted migrants. Whereas Germany followed by the Netherlands have become the most popular European migration countries for Daraawis. Such preferences are not, of course, fixed and changes in the migration policies of a given country shift individual preferences.

Migration from southern Syria, especially among young adults, has long-term direct and indirect repercussions on local communities in Daraa. This includes: brain-drain and loss of labour; the collapse of agricultural and other local economic activities; and demographic consequences such as the size, age structure, and the overall number of future births. On the other hand, migration has positive impacts on the sending communities, too. While migration allows individuals to relocate to a safe country and to benefit from economic incentives to start a new life, it should not be viewed as a complete break with the home country. Migrants can send remittances and can contribute to household income, promote philanthropy, and provide systematic support to enhance economic growth back at home. They can also advocate for home-country interests in host communities. With adequate support provided by the governments of host countries, educated and skilled Daraawi migrants can organise collectively and promote diverse short- and long-term peacebuilding tasks in Daraa.

59 Bethan McKernan, “Denmark Strips Syrian Refugees of Residency Permits and Says it is Safe to Go Home,” *The Guardian*, 21 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3olMNnl>

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